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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001372

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SUBJECT: NATIONAL MOVEMENT OF SOUTH AZERBAIJAN CONFERENCE
CALLS FOR ACTION AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

REF: BAKU 1266

Classified By: DCM Jason P. Hyland for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The National Movement of South Azerbaijan held its first-ever forum in Baku on 12 September to draw international attention to the plight of Iran's ethnic Azeris. Under the leadership of Etibar Mammadov, an Azerbaijani opposition politician (reftel), the movement is made up of representatives from a number of political organizations seeking greater independence for ethnic Azeris in Iran. At the conference, over one hundred participants representing a wide range of political parties, NGOs, human rights organizations, and the press gathered to exchange ideas and discuss strategies for elevating this issue to the international level. While official representatives of the GOAJ did not participate in the event, a number of members of political parties closely affiliated with the government did (possibly in an effort to deflect ongoing opposition criticism of the government for its failure to support ethnic Azeris in Iran). Conference participants urged Azeris worldwide to focus their efforts, called upon the international community to support ethnic Azeris living in Iran, and urged ethnic Azeris occupying positions of authority in Iran to support their ethnic brethren. The conference, which received extensive local media coverage, resulted in the formation of a "coordination council" which will work to achieve international support for the movement, protect the rights of ethnic Azeris in Iran, and provide information and support to the movement. End Summary.

The Speakers

12. (C) Opening the National Movement of South Azerbaijan's 12 September conference, Azerbaijani opposition politician Etibar Mammadov stated that the May 2006 demonstrations by Iran's ethnic Azeri community had catalyzed Azeris everywhere and spawned a "national movement" seeking to guarantee their rights. Citing the increased national awareness of Iran's ethnic Azeris and their demands for greater national, cultural, and economic rights, Mammadov called upon the support of the international community. He made numerous references to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, claiming the treatment of ethnic Azeris in Iran is no different from that experienced by Nagorno-Karabakh's former Azerbaijani community. Concluding, Mammadov urged conference attendees to support the "national reawakening" of Iran's ethnic Azeris by consolidating their efforts and helping to better communicate the demands of ethnic Azeris to the international community.

13. (C) Following Mammadov's call-to-action, Sadiq Isabeyli,

another Azerbaijani advocate of Iran's ethnic Azeris, provided an extensive overview of the oppressive measures undertaken against the ethnic Azeri movement by Iranian authorities. Drawing upon an extensive array of video and photographic evidence, Isabeyli sought to illuminate the Islamic Republic's "ruthless suppression" of its ethnic Azeris. The final speaker to address the conference was Ahmad Obali, an ethnic Azeri originally from Iran and head of GunAz Television (a Chicago-based satellite television station that broadcasts to Iran's ethnic Azeri population). Obali's speech provided participants with detailed insights into the nature and scope of the May 2006 protests, offered details of Iran's efforts to weaken its ethnic Azeri population through assimilation, and called upon Azeris everywhere to become more self reliant and start working together to better support their ethnic brethren in Iran.

The Participants

14. (C) Participants in the conference represented a wide range of political parties, NGOs, human rights organizations, and media outlets. Notable participants from the Azerbaijani political opposition included Members of Parliament Asim Mollazade and Panah Huseynli, Sardar Jalaloghlu, deputy chairman of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, and Almurad Elchibay, brother of late President Abulfaz Elchibay. Also in attendance were opposition politicians and Members of Parliament with allegedly close ties to the government, locally referred to as the "pocket opposition." One conference participant noted their presence, saying privately that this was a clear indication that the government was sensitive to ongoing opposition criticism of the GOAJ's

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position on the status and treatment of ethnic Azeris living in Iran (the GOAJ having taken an extremely low-key public stance on the May 2006 protests).

15. (C) A number of human rights activists and representatives from international Azeri organizations also participated. Advocates for ethnic Azeris included Murad Saddadinov, a well-known Azerbaijani human rights activist, and Tunzala Rustamkhanli, a vocal advocate on the behalf of Armenian and Iranian Azeri populations. A variety of Georgian Azeri organizations participated as did representatives from international political organizations seeking greater independence for Iran's ethnic Azeris. These included Ajdar Taghizade and Ali Nicat of the World Azerbaijani Congress (DAK), Mahmud Bilgin of the Azerbaijani Federation of Sweden, Baku spokesperson of the Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (GAMOH) Agri Qaradagli, and Saleh Ildirim of the South Azerbaijan Independence Party (GAIP). Later in the conference, these five representatives along with the three keynote speakers were selected to form the movement's "coordination council." Tasked with achieving international recognition of and support for the movement, Etibar Mammadov was selected to head the new council.

16. (C) Local journalists participated in the conference and media coverage was extensive. In addition to local media coverage, journalists from Turkey's TRT Television covered the event. Mrs. Zahra Sayyadi, Baku bureau chief of the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), herself an ethnic Azeri, also attended.

The Results

17. (C) Comment: The day-long conference at the four-star Europe Hotel was surprisingly well organized and funded (it is not clear who provided funding for this event or who is backing the movement financially). Following the keynote

addresses, a number of roundtable discussions and strategy sessions were held, affording participants the opportunity to meet and share their views. Despite numerous references to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and attempts by some participants to draw parallels and connect the two issues, these efforts did not distract participants from the task at hand. Also noteworthy was the near total absence of any criticism of the GOAJ or international community for failing to act in support of Iran's ethnic Azeris. However, several days later in a local newspaper article, Etibar Mammadov accused the U.S. of having "supported the mullah regime in Iran" by remaining silent and not speaking out in support of ethnic Azeris during the May protests. End comment.

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